



Hallelujah!

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A Bicentennial Tribute to William Walker

by

Harry Eskew

The year 1809 was a stellar year for the birth of several famous Americans, including President Abraham Lincoln and the poet Edgar Allan Poe. It is also the birth year of the British scientist Charles Darwin and the German composer Felix Mendelssohn. In the midst of this time, vibrant with new ideas, experiments, and discoveries, William Walker, popularly known as "Singing Billy Walker," was born, the second generation of Americans. Walker is perhaps the most influential musician South Carolina has ever produced, creating and preserving for Americans music that evinced the culture of the new nation and continues to permeate the music world almost two centuries later.

Who was Singing Billy Walker, and why is he important?

Walker's music had been around for over a hundred years, when I was born in Spartanburg, South Carolina, where Walker had made most of his contributions. During my teen years I discovered an old music book, *Christian Harmony*, in my family's possession. At the close of the tunebook's preface were the words "William Walker, Spartanburg,

South Carolina, 1866." This aroused my curiosity, years later leading to a masters thesis on Walker and research on the shape-note singing school tradition.

Although Walker lived his adult years in Spartanburg, he was born in Union County on the Tiger River, about three miles from the village of Cross Keys. His exact birthplace has not yet been determined. Walker's family included the Rev. John Landrum, the first pastor of the First Baptist Church of Spartanburg, and the Rev. Newton Pinckney Walker, founder of South Carolina's Institution for the Deaf and Blind at Cedar Springs. More important for Walker's musical endeavors, his sister-in-law married Benjamin Franklin White, who in 1844 collaborated with Elisha J. King in compiling the famous singing school book, *The Sacred Harp*.

Walker's musical training began early in life. By the time he was five, his mother had taught him three hymns with tunes reflecting the Anglo-American folk idiom. In all probability Walker received musical instruction in singing schools, for by the age of eighteen he had composed his first piece of music.

In 1835, the then twenty-six year old Walker married Amy Shands Golightly (1811–97), who over the course of their long marriage bore him ten children. In 1839, the Walkers became members of the newly organized First Baptist Church of Spartanburg, where, during his 36 years in that church, he served as a deacon, a frequent messenger to the association, and a leader of congregational singing.

Despite the limits of his own formal education, Walker strongly supported educational institutions within his own community. In 1835, he was a trustee of the

newly founded Spartanburg Male Academy, and in the same year, he was among eleven subscribers who pledged \$1300 to establish the Female Seminary in Spartanburg. On July 4, 1851, William Walker participated in laying the cornerstone of Wofford College.

Along with his musical activities, Walker operated a bookstore in Spartanburg, a store that functioned as both a book and stationary store. Walker's publication of *Southern Harmony* was an important factor in the success of his bookstore, enabling him to sell merchandise at lower prices, as reported in an advertisement in 1857 in the Spartanburg Express newspaper:

I have made permanent arrangements with several large book houses in New York and Philadelphia, to exchange my music work, the Southern Harmony, at cash prices for their books etc. At cash prices nett. [sic] I will therefore be able to sell books and stationary lower than they have ever been sold in Spartanburg, and as I desire to do a cash business, I will sell at Columbia and Charleston prices. (January 8, 1857)

This advertisement illustrates Walker's business acumen. It also documents that Walker was not simply a southerner whose works were limited to the South, for *Southern Harmony* was sold in the North as well. This is all the more remarkable given the increasing regional conflict leading up to the Civil War.

In Walker's time, singing schools were the primary means of education in vocal music in numerous small town and rural areas of

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the United States. Vocal music was taught using syllables, a practice first attributed to an Italian monk of the Middle Ages, Guido of Arezzo. In early America the major scale was taught using four syllables, fa, sol, la, and mi. The first three of these were repeated, making the scale: fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa. About 1800, a short cut to reading music called shape notes was invented. Each of these four syllables had a different shaped note head: an oval, square, triangle, and diamond. Singers learned to associate each shape with the syllable and its corresponding sound. It was an ingenious invention, for once a singer learned the shapes, there was no need to learn the complications of the lines and spaces of the musical staff and the numerous keys. Shape notes became so popular that in many areas it was practically impossible to get a singing

school music book published unless it was printed in shape notes.

Singing Billy Walker compiled four books in shape notes, two of which are still in use. Walker's most popular book in his lifetime was his first book, *Southern Harmony*, published in 1835 with later editions up to 1854. It reportedly sold more than 600,000 copies, a phenomenal figure for the South in its day. Walker took great pride in his popular music book, signing his name, "William Walker, A. S. H."—"Author of *Southern Harmony*."

Music books such as *Southern Harmony* served several purposes. They began with musical rudiments designed for teaching the basics of music. Walker was widely known as a singing school teacher and taught other music teachers as well, traveling thousands of miles in the southern and mid-western states. Although *Southern Harmony* was not a church hymnal as such, its texts were practically all religious. Singing school books provided music harmonized in several voice parts for the hymns used in the churches of his day. Walker was unusually successful in publishing music that was popular with people in the Upper South.

Hymnals in Walker's day were typically small pocket-sized books containing only the words of hymns. Walker provided music for words already published in these little hymnals. One of these small words-only hymnals, titled *Baptist Harmony*, had just been published a year before *Southern Harmony* by Staunton S. Burdett, a South Carolina Baptist pastor serving a church near Lancaster. Walker and Burdett were friends and Burdett kept copies of *Southern Harmony* to sell. In those days, the pastors wrote the hymn texts and compiled little words-only hymnals and laymen musicians compiled music books for use in singing schools to teach people how to read music and sing their faith. Walker was also a collector of music from oral tradition, music we today call folk music. He and others so thoroughly absorbed the idiom of Anglo-American folk song that their own compositions were hardly distinguishable from songs that had existed in oral tradition. Walker took melodies from oral tradition, harmonized them, and published them as his own. As he wrote in the preface to the first edition of *Southern Harmony*,

I have composed the parts to a great many good airs (which I could not find in any publication, nor in manuscript), and assigned my name as the author. I have also composed several tunes wholly, and inserted them in this work, which also bear my name.

Walker and other singing school teachers wrote down melodies from oral tradition, harmonized them in several voice parts, and published them in singing school tunebooks. This is strictly an a cappella tradition without musical instruments. It is also music performed by the singers for themselves in community, and not performed for an audience. Books such as Walker's *Southern Harmony* constitute a wonderful treasury of early Americana which is widely known and appreciated by churches of many denominations today.

Shape notes and music books like *Southern Harmony* and *The Sacred Harp* were largely rejected in the urban cities of the North. They preferred sacred music based on European models harmonized in the tradition of Bach and Handel. In the latter nineteenth century the music of the Sunday school and urban revivalism tended to overshadow the shape-note tradition of the early South. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, there was a revival of interest in the early shape-note tradition.

Today the most popular shape-note tunebook is *The Sacred Harp*, published in western Georgia in 1844 by two singing school teachers, Benjamin Franklin White and his much younger collaborator, Elisha J. King, who died shortly after its publication.

B. F. White was born in Spartanburg in 1800, so Spartanburg can claim two of the greatest musicians of the early shape-note tradition. White and Walker were related by marriage. In 1842 the White family moved to Hamilton, seat of Harris County in western Georgia near where Calloway Gardens is today. White's book is the most popular shape-note tunebook today, having spread to every state, to provinces of Canada, and even to Great Britain. *Southern Harmony* is rarely used in singings except for the famous one at Benton, Kentucky. However, it has had a much greater influence in providing music

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How did it happen that the *Southern Harmony* largely went out of use? Beginning about the 1840s, singing school books gradually appeared using seven shapes based on the do-re-mi syllables, rather than four. While B. F. White stuck to the older fasola four-shape system for all the editions of *The Sacred Harp*, Walker became convinced that the seven-shape system was better. The logic he applied asked the question, "Would any father having seven children think of calling them by only four names?" Walker published his second major music book in seven shapes, based on the do-re-mi system. Titled *Christian Harmony* and published in 1867 with a revised edition in 1873, Walker's seven-shape book is used in singings in the Southeast in two current editions in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and in the mountains of North Carolina.

Singing sessions using Walker's books in South Carolina died out in the first half of the twentieth century. Sixteen years ago a South Carolina Singing in memory of William Walker started on the campus of Wofford College. The 15th singing at Wofford took place in March 2009. Singers sang from both the four-shape *Sacred Harp* and the seven-shape *Christian Harmony*. A unique feature of the singing at Wofford is its closing ceremony. At the conclusion the singers go to nearby Magnolia Cemetery to sing the final song and offer a prayer of thanks for the life and work of this Spartanburg musician born 200 years ago this year, Singing Billy Walker.

The Fasola Tradition

The musical tradition that Walker and his fellow singing school teacher-composers have bequeathed to us is often called the "Fasola" tradition, named after the three repeated syllables in the shape-note scale. This early American tradition, primarily arising in the Southeast in the early decades of the nineteenth century, has had a significant influence on hymnals of major denominations and on the repertory of many choirs.

Three representative folk hymns first published by Walker illustrate this tradition: "What Wondrous Love Is This, O My Soul" (*Wondrous Love*), "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand" (*Promised Land*), and "Amazing

Grace, How Sweet the Sound" (*New Britain*).

The text of *Wondrous Love* appeared anonymously in two hymnals published in 1811. The words and music did not appear together until the 1840 edition of Walker's *Southern Harmony*. There the tune simply bears the name "Christopher" with no further elaboration. In his later tunebook, *The Christian Harmony* (1867), Walker describes *Wondrous Love* as a "very popular old southern tune" and identifies the arranger as James Christopher of Spartanburg. We know practically nothing about Christopher, but have discovered his tomb in the Sharon United Methodist Church Cemetery, near Reidville in Spartanburg County. As is customary in this tradition, the melody is in the tenor voice. While it is notated in the Mixolydian mode, in performance it is sung in the Dorian with the sixth raised. Other common traits include chords without thirds and parallel fifths and octaves. One unusual feature is that both text and music are of American origin.

Choirs may effectively perform *Wondrous Love* and other folk hymns as written, perhaps varying the voicing from one stanza to another. One of the finest arrangements that respects the style of this tradition is by Alice Parker and Robert Shaw.

Published in 1787, "On Jordan's Stormy

Banks I Stand" was written by the English Baptist pastor Samuel Stennett. The chorus, "I am bound for the promised land," was added by an unknown American, probably during the camp meeting revivals of the early nineteenth century. Only the first of Stennett's eight stanzas appears in *Southern Harmony*. *Promised Land*, first published by Walker in 1835, is an Aeolian melody omitting the pitch D. This rugged minor melody was changed to major in the latter nineteenth century to accommodate the newer gospel hymn tradition, the way it appears in most hymnals of today. The melody of *Promised Land* is pentatonic with D and E omitted. The harmonization characteristically makes prominent use of chords without thirds. Both the opening and closing chords are dyads, as are the half notes that close the internal phrases. This harmonization gives the folk hymn an open, hollow sound.

Who was the M. Durham who harmonized *Promised Land*? We now know that she was Matilda Durham of Spartanburg, who married Andrew Hoy and moved with her husband to Cobb County, Georgia. In the case of both James Christopher and Matilda Durham Hoy, Walker drew upon the musical talent of Spartanburg area musicians to provide harmonizations for the tunes he published. Two unaccompanied arrangements of

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Promised Land in keeping with the style of the original folk hymn have been composed by K. Lee Scott, and by Ronald Staheli

New Britain

Amazing Grace is by far the most popular of our early American folk hymns. Its stanzas were written by John Newton, an English slave trader whose life was completely turned around by the grace of God. Following his conversion experience, Newton left the sea and responded to a calling to the ministry, serving several Anglican parishes. His life story is summarized in the epitaph he wrote for himself:

*John Newton, Clerk
Once an infidel and libertine,
A servant of slaves in Africa:
Was by the rich mercy of our Lord and
Savior, Jesus Christ,
Preserved, restored, pardoned,
And appointed to preach the Faith
He had labored long to destroy . . .*

Newton originally wrote six stanzas of *Amazing Grace*, four of which are usually included in hymnals of today. It is really an autobiographical hymn, giving us John New-

ton's life story in verse form. The final stanza, beginning with "When we've been there ten thousand years," was not written by Newton, but was added by an unknown American.

The melody of *Amazing Grace*, named *New Britain*, had been published as early as 1829 with other hymn texts, but Walker published it with the text of *Amazing Grace* for the first time in the initial edition of *Southern Harmony* in 1835. *New Britain* is pentatonic and is harmonized with typical dyads, parallel fifths, and parallel octaves.

Popular around the world, *Amazing Grace* has transcended cultural boundaries. It has been aptly named America's most beloved song. In 1990, journalist Bill Moyers produced an inspiring full-length documentary on this beloved hymn. The best known choral arrangement of *Amazing Grace*, is that of Robert Shaw and Alice Parker.

Walker's Legacy

Two hundred years after his birth, Walker's rich legacy clearly encompasses several areas. As a singing school teacher and a teacher of music in normal schools, Walker spread musical literacy especially in the South, teaching many thousands of teachers how to read choral music using

shape notes. Walker also contributed to community singing through his own music books and even more through his compositions published in the popular *Sacred Harp*. Researcher Glenn E. Latimer analyzed the frequency of songs using the minutes of *Sacred Harp* singings in 2005. He found that of the top 25 *Sacred Harp* songs in 2005, number one was Walker's *Hallelujah* and two other songs from *Southern Harmony* were *New Britain* (number 7) and *Wondrous Love* (number 20). These same three tunes placed among the top three among songs used for Memorial Lessons at *Sacred Harp* singings. Among the top songs from closing *Sacred Harp* singings in 2005, number one was *Parting Hand* from *Southern Harmony*; two others were *Hallelujah* and *New Britain*. The popularity of Walker's tunes and those from *Southern Harmony* at present-day *Sacred Harp* singings are also a significant part of Walker's impact on community singing.

A third area of Walker's legacy is his contribution to the choral repertory. Walker was close to the oral tradition of folk song, preserving in his music books melodies passed along by word of mouth and publishing them in the distinctive harmonies of the fasola style. These choral works have been widely used by choirs in schools and churches. Choral musicians owe a real debt to Alice Parker and the late Robert Shaw for making this rich early American folk hymn tradition available in beautiful arrangements that respect the style of the original versions.

Perhaps Walker's greatest contribution is his impact on congregational singing. Practically all major hymnals draw on the early American folk hymn tradition; several of these hymns have gained broad ecumenical acceptance. Hymn singing is a significant part of the worship of most churches, and the voices of congregations across many denominations singing these hymns of the early South testify to the continued vitality of Walker's legacy.

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